

MANHUNT

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you should live so long

by JACK RITCHIE



A young girl in the oldest profession. No wonder she didn't know all the rules.

THE PHONE CALL got me out of bed. I had a couple of cups of coffee first and then got to Emma's place before eight.

Emma was there to open one of the big double doors herself. Her face was still flaky with last night's powder and her eyes were small in the bloat of her face.

She put a hand in front of her face and bit at her yawn. "Maylee Doyle," she said. "I got her locked up in room 23."

I draped my topcoat over a hanger and put it in the hall closet. "You're getting old, Emma, when you got to call the boss for help."

She shrugged. "Maybe tired. It just don't interest me to use the heavy hand myself any more. Besides, this isn't just the normal sassy tongue type of thing. I caught Maylee coming down the stairs with a suitcase in her hand this morning."

Emma fumbled in the pocket of her dressing gown and brought out a pack of cigarettes. "I been watching her for the last week, Freddy boy. When a girl has that look in her eyes, she wants to quit."

Emma took a drag on the cigarette. "Maybe she saved up her money. Maybe she wants to go back to Prairie Junction or wherever the hell she came

from. Sometimes the girls start thinking about all-electric kitchens, a garden, and somebody to water the lawn on summer evenings."

In the big room downstairs one of the maids in uniform was cleaning up. She glanced at me disinterestedly and continued emptying and stacking the ash trays.

Emma pulled out a ring of keys and selected one. She scowled in the direction of the stairs leading to the second floor. "No blood, Freddy. We just got that room re-decorated. And don't make too much noise. Most of the girls are still sleeping."

The wide stairway was thick-carpeted and soft under my feet. The windows at the ends of the hall were opened for the morning ventilation, but there still lingered the scent of musky perfume.

I turned the key in the lock of room 23.

Maylee Doyle sat on the edge of the crimson bedspread with a small glass ash tray on her knees. She was in her early twenties and her gray eyes watched me almost impassively.

I closed the door behind me and locked it.

Maylee stubbed out her cigarette. Her hand moved into her purse and came out with a sharp nail file.

"Now, Maylee," I asked softly, "what seems to be the trouble?"

Her eyes narrowed with wariness. "There's no trouble if you unlock the door."

I moved closer. "You just want to leave, isn't that it?"

Her face was expressionless. "That's all I want."

I shook my head slowly. "It's not that easy, Maylee. You girls just don't quit when you work for me."

She had a half-smile on her lips. "Now tell me the story of the syndicate. Tell me I can't escape. Tell me that it reaches out into every nook and cranny of the nation and a couple of foreign countries besides."

I smiled at her. "That's the second step, Maylee. I use it when the first one doesn't work."

Her small hand held the nail file tightly. "There's not going to be a first step."

I grinned and drifted closer.

She tried for my eyes the way I thought she would, but I caught her wrist and twisted. She made no noise, but her face whitened at the pressure.

I picked up the nail file and tossed it into the waste basket.

Maylee sat still on the bed, her body stiff.

I slapped her hard across the face. Her head jerked with the blow, but she faced me again. There was only cold hate in her eyes.

I slapped her again and then stepped back to study her. Some of them cave in with just a little pressure. They whimper and they cry. And others you can beat to death and get nowhere.

I picked Maylee's purse off the bed and opened it. I examined the entries in the small green bank book. Maylee had less than two hundred dollars in the bank. According to the figures, she never had much more than that at any time.

I tossed the bank book on the dresser. "I'm curious, Maylee. I've seen the girls try to get out of the racket because they saved their money. What's your reason?"

She was silent.

My slap drew a little blood from her lower lip. I put my hands behind my back and looked down at her. "Somebody offer to set you up in an apartment, Maylee?"

She glared at me and said nothing.

I shook my head. "I guess that's not it then, Maylee. In the old days the boys with money weren't so particular. But now they like the amateur type. The innocent kind without mileage."

I smiled as I watched her. "I'll keep guessing, Maylee. I'll keep guessing and I'll hit it."

I walked around the room moving things absently. Then I glanced at Maylee. "But we got one thing straight, haven't we? You're thinking of leaving because of a man?"

There was just the slightest flicker in Maylee's eyes, but it was enough for me.

I grinned and folded my arms over my chest. "I think I can see it, Maylee. He's a clean-cut type you met while you were taking a walk in the park or something. You know what I mean, Maylee? And I'll bet he's sincere. A sort of boy-man. They always seem to appeal to you girls. I imagine he thinks of you as a goddess. Is that right, Maylee?"

Her cheekbones reddened. "You dirty bastard," she said tightly.

I rubbed my jaw. "I'm just wondering if you really deserve something like that. Think of how you've been earning your room, board, and perfume the last three years."

I teetered on my toes. "Suppose someone was to tell him, Maylee?"

There was something like a smile in her eyes and for a moment it stopped me. And then I got it.

I waited half a minute while I thought it out. "So he knows all about you and he loves you just the same? That must be it, Maylee."

She didn't have to say anything. It was there in her eyes.

I shook my head. "I just hate to lose, Maylee. I hate it like hell."

And after a few seconds I smiled again. "I'll bet you promised him that there would never be another man again."

I took a step forward. "But there's going to be one more, Maylee. At least one more."

Maylee tried to slip away, but my hand caught her and swung her to the bed. She fought and scratched, but my hand went to the neckline of her dress.

When I came downstairs, Emma was in an arm chair drinking a cup of coffee.

She looked up. "Well?"

I shrugged. "I don't think we can hold her."

Emma was moody. "Hell, she was one of the best we had."

I was slipping into my topcoat when the doorbell chimed. Emma groaned her way out of her chair and went past me to answer it.

A tall, thin man with shell-rimmed glasses stood in the doorway. He was extremely nervous, but at the same time there was determination in his chin. "I've come to get Maylee," he said defiantly. "She was supposed to meet me at seven-thirty at the railroad station, but she didn't show up."

Emma and I exchanged glances. She shrugged her shoulders. "I never seen him before."

"Come in," I said. "We've been expecting you."

He hesitated for a moment and then crossed the sill. He swallowed uneasily.

I lit a cigarette and looked him over. His clothes were obviously inexpensive and ready-made. "I suppose you were prepared to batter down the door or something like that?"

"If necessary," he said stiffly.

I grinned. "That would hardly have been necessary. All the girls are free to go whenever they want. I'm afraid you've been reading some of those old-fashioned novels."

I sighed. "We'll hate to lose Maylee. She's been with us for three years, you know."

I guess he didn't. That must have been a lot longer than Maylee had told him.

I shook my head. "I hope we don't lose any of our regular customers because of this. Maylee was quite a favorite. She had certain specialties."

He lost a little color, but his face remained stiff. "Maylee's told me everything I need to know."

"Ah, yes," I said thoughtfully. "These are all fine girls and happy. They like this type of work."

I turned to Emma. "Why don't you go up and see what's keeping Maylee?"

Emma looked at me questioningly for a moment and then moved on. She palmed the keys on the cocktail table as she passed it.

The thin man surveyed me with narrowed eyes. "I want to warn you that it will do you no good to blackmail us. In the first place we'll never have a lot of money. I'm just a bookkeeper."

I thought that was somewhat regrettable. Certainly from my point of view.

"And besides," he continued with a trace of smugness, "we're going a long way from here. And we'll make certain that we're not followed. I'll change my name, if necessary."

"It's really quite refreshing," I said. "To see a man of your caliber willing to marry a . . ." I held up my hand. "I'm sorry. I won't use the word. But still, it is refreshing. I imagine you must also have terrific confidence in yourself."

His eyes were puzzled and suspicious. "Confidence?"

"Why, yes," I said. "After all, in the three years Maylee's been here she's known . . . I believe that's the expression. Biblical, isn't it? . . . Well, she's known. . . ." I looked at the ceiling and my lips moved with silent mathematics.

I laughed self-consciously. "I'm not too good with figures, but you get the general idea of why I admire your confidence. After all, you'll be competing with probably a couple of thousand men." I thought it over. "Possibly the number of individuals is somewhat less. A lot of them were repeaters."

His face was dead white.

"I wonder," I said thoughtfully, "if she'll ever think of any of them." I smiled. "After you're asleep, of course."

From the way he threw his right, I'd say that he never had a fight in his life. I blocked the hook easily. My right to his jaw snapped the consciousness from his eyes and he dropped to the floor.

I bent over him and took the wallet from his pocket. His driver's license showed that his name was James Wells and I guess he was right about being just a bookkeeper. His last pay check was for less than sixty-eight dollars.

Emma came back alone. "Maylee will be down in a minute or two."

I put the wallet back in Wells' pocket. "I guess it must be true love, Emma," I said. "He's a nobody."

I propped Wells up and slapped him a couple of times to bring him to. After awhile he groaned and opened his eyes. He glared at me with hate and helplessness.

I lit a cigarette and took a puff. "I wonder if Maylee's going to miss this life. Once the girls get started on this type of thing, it's hard for them to quit."

Maylee appeared at the head of the stairs carrying her suitcase. The side of her face was swollen and she walked down slowly, her hand on the rail.

Wells stood up almost reluctantly. He seemed to look at her as though he had never seen her before.

I let Maylee get to the foot of the stairs. Then I took out my wallet and pulled out two tens. "Never let it be said that the boss doesn't pay when he samples the stock. I'm sorry about the face, Maylee, but you know that's the way I like to have mine. I guess you do too. At least you've never complained."

Maylee went past me without so much as a glance. There was a timid smile on her face as she looked at Wells.

He flinched slightly when she touched his arm.

It was an electric shock to Maylee and her eyes widened. "Jimmy, what's the matter?"

He couldn't meet her eyes. "Nothing," he said gruffly. "Let's go."

Maylee whirled on me and her voice was a hiss. "What have you done? What have you told him?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Why nothing, Maylee. I didn't have to lie."

I turned to Wells who was edging for the door. "I gather that you missed your train. Wouldn't it be more economical if you just left Maylee here until tomorrow morning? It would save you hotel bills for tonight."

Maylee's voice was high with panic. "No, Jimmy. I want you to take me away right now."

"Come now, Maylee," I said soothingly, "let's be sensible. What difference can twenty-four hours mean when you've been here three years already?"

Wells licked his lips.

Maylee met his eyes and knew by his indecision that I had killed something. Her face was white as she clutched his arm. "Take me with you now, Jimmy!"

He shook his head stubbornly and forced open her grip. I took a tight hold on Maylee's arm and kept her away from him.

Wells moved quickly to the door and opened it. There was the color of guilt in his face. "I'll call for you tomorrow morning, Maylee."

Like hell you will, I thought.

And Maylee knew it too. She screamed and tried to follow him, but I tightened my grip on her arm.

She struggled for half a minute more after Wells left and then burst into hysterical tears.

I let her cry until she was exhausted and then I gave her an order. "Get back upstairs, Maylee."

She picked up the suitcase and moved without spirit.

When I left Emma's place, I walked two blocks to where I'd parked my car.

A uniformed cop had one foot on the bumper of my sedan and he was writing out a ticket.

I came up behind him. "Hundreds of people get robbed every day, but you cops got nothing better to do than write out tickets for honest taxpayers."

He didn't look back. "You're parked practically on top of a fire plug, mister. As soon as I fill this out, I'll go chase a couple of rapists for you."

He tore out the ticket and turned around. Then he grinned and crumpled it up. "Hell, it's you."

He put his book back in his pocket and studied my car. "That's a pretty beat-up mess you got there, Fred. A detective sergeant ought to be able to show something a little better for his salary."

I opened the door and slid inside. "I'm saving my money, Al. One of these days I'm taking off for Cuba and buy myself a couple of estates. I'll have a dozen Jaguars."

He laughed. "You should live so long."

I grinned. "You're damn right I will."



Thoughtful Thief

At Nogales, Mexico, Hugo W. Miller told police that a thief stole his wallet during a festival in the border town. "But the pickpocket was considerate," Miller said, "and in a good mood, I guess. He buttoned my pocket again after lifting my billfold."

Trial and Error

Members of the Pershing School PTA at Repert, Ida., are looking for other means of raising money after their "circulating basket" project failed. They placed three baskets into circulation with instructions that they be passed around from person to person, collecting food and money for the school. But all three baskets disappeared.

Writ of Error

In Lumberton, N. C., Judge Raymond Mallard arrived to preside over a term of superior court. One of the first documents he picked up was an order committing him to prison for two years for bootlegging.

An investigation disclosed that the assistant clerk of court was typing the commitment order for another man when the telephone rang. The caller asked who was conducting court. And the clerk typed Judge Mallard's name as she replied. The Judge lost no time in beating the rap.